

A Collector's Guide Plus Two Sterling Collections

WILLIAM BUTTS

RAAB, Steven S. and RAAB, Jonas. *In the Presence of History: The Authoritative Guide to Historical Autographs for Collectors, History Enthusiasts and Investors.* Philadelphia: The Diamond Press, 2009. Small 4to. Softbound. 178pp. Numerous color illustrations. **\$33.50.**

RENDELL, Kenneth W. *World War II: Saving the Reality—A Collector's Vault.* Foreword by Doris Kearns Goodwin. Atlanta: Whitman Publishing, 2009. Small 4to. Hardbound, slipcase. 144pp. Numerous color illustrations and inserts. **\$49.95.**

(BRITTON, Burt). *Portrait of the Artist: The Burt Britton Collection.* New York: Bloomsbury Auctions, 24 September 2009. 4to. Softbound. 118pp. Numerous illustrations. **\$35.00.**

The small shelf of entry-level general interest how-to volumes on autograph collecting can now boast a classy new addition. The father/son combination of Steve and Jonas Raab offer up a fine two-punch in their *In the Presence of History*.

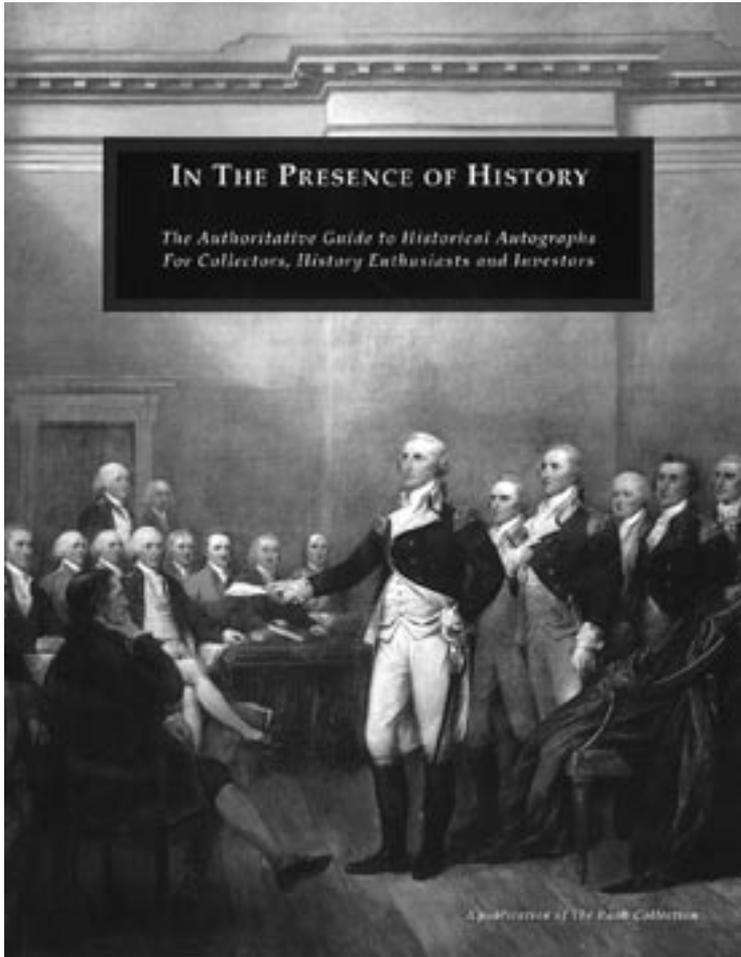
In the Presence of History takes the reader through all the expected chapters: "An Introduction to Autographs," "Assessing

the Quality and Value of Autographs,” “Treasures We Have Hunted,” “Buying and Selling Autographs,” “Authenticating Autographs,” “Particular Issues in Buying Autographs,” “A Miscellany of Autograph Nuggets,” “Guide to Presidential Autographs” and “American Historical Autographs: Who to Collect.” Steve is a long-time Philadelphia dealer of sound reputation and inventory. Moreover, he’s savvy and articulate, and each of these sections contains pearls of hard-won wisdom too numerous to go into here.

What I most like about *In the Presence of History* is the authors’ willingness to take a stance—they have strong opinions and high standards and don’t hesitate to express them. No wishy-washy pussy-footin’ around here. Too often general collecting books such as this are penned by collectors and commissioned writers whose immersion in the topic is that of an enthusiastic amateur and whose opinions aren’t tempered with hard experience. Such authors hedge in their judgments, and it shows in their text. Experienced full-time dealers, on the other hand, tend to be hardcore and no-nonsense. The Raabs are just that—plus they have attitude with an A. I like that.

Don’t expect any radical departures from the accepted conventions of autograph collecting. Buy the best examples you can afford... buy the best condition you can afford... buy from reputable sources... etcetera. No surprises here. But do expect a much different tone than that found in older autograph collecting tomes. Earlier how-to’s addressed a small audience whose suppliers were a cozy coterie of well-known dealers marketing through printed catalogues; the overall tone is genteel and scholarly. The Raabs address a larger, scattered audience whose suppliers are mainly online (well-known dealers jostling alongside oodles of slick no-name presences of questionable expertise) and who are jaded by autograph scandals, eBay scams and a dozen other distractions. So pay special attention to the Raabs’ more hard-nosed approach to buying from dealers and gauging their expertise—plus their more in-depth comments on learning how to authenticate autographs. Such content from experienced dealers goes a long way toward shortening the learning curve for novice collectors.

Physically, *In the Presence of History* is handsome: Clean, classy, professional. It’s refreshingly free of the glaring snafus and em-



barrassing amateurishness that mar many of the self-published titles reviewed in this column. Would a trade publisher's touch have improved it? Probably, in ways that would make it more user-friendly, a bit easier on the eyes. Type size is too, too small, and while the margins appear generous and eye-pleasing, a larger type size and smaller margins would make the text more readable without increasing total number of pages (which increases cost). Same with the many division headings within each chapter: Make them larger, make them boldface. And same,

too, with the countless photo captions: Not only is the type size painfully small (I'm talking a minuscule 5 or 6 point), but captions appear within grey backgrounds, which further hampers legibility.

The lack of any acknowledgments or bibliography in *In the Presence of History* is a regrettable oversight. Sure, casual readers gloss over these as incidental and unimportant—but many use these as indispensable learning tools. Just as “No man is an island, entire of itself,” so too no book is an island, created in a vacuum. We stand on the shoulders of those before us, so to not list the many books it's assumed any dealer would have studied and referenced is a slight that should be remedied. One important service of any great how-to book is to provide a blueprint to continue the reader's further education. The misguided may take this oversight as a mark that the Raab book isn't an objective overview but a self-serving sales tool.

A hardbound edition would of course be wonderful, and would ensure the book's longer survival on public library shelves that wreak havoc on paperbacks. But the cold economic realities of publishing today—a lose/lose situation if ever there was one—surely prohibit such a luxury. (Although, to plant a seed, the snob appeal of a “collector's edition,” identical but for a hard binding and limitation of, say, 50 or 100 numbered copies signed by the authors and sold at a higher price of, say, \$50, can be accomplished economically. Such editions often manage to sell out and therefore make economic sense. That's one way to get durable copies out there likely to survive into the 22nd century!)

So move over Mary Benjamin's *Autographs: A Key to Collecting* (1946), move over Charles Hamilton's *Collecting Autographs and Manuscripts* (1961), move over Kenneth Rendell's *History Comes to Life: Collecting Historical Letters and Documents* (1995). Also note that these standard texts are all penned by dealers—I've long been a vocal proponent of dealers sharing their expertise. The Raab's *In the Presence of History* refines and updates its predecessors. The more things change, the more they stay the same is a maxim of which I'm fond—and in the world of historical autographs, it's truth shines through again and again. Yet at the same time we do learn from the lessons of those who precede us. So too with autograph collecting how-to's. *In the Presence of History*

brings autograph collecting firmly into the internet age. Though not perfect, every serious or wannabee-serious collector is well advised to read and absorb its lessons.

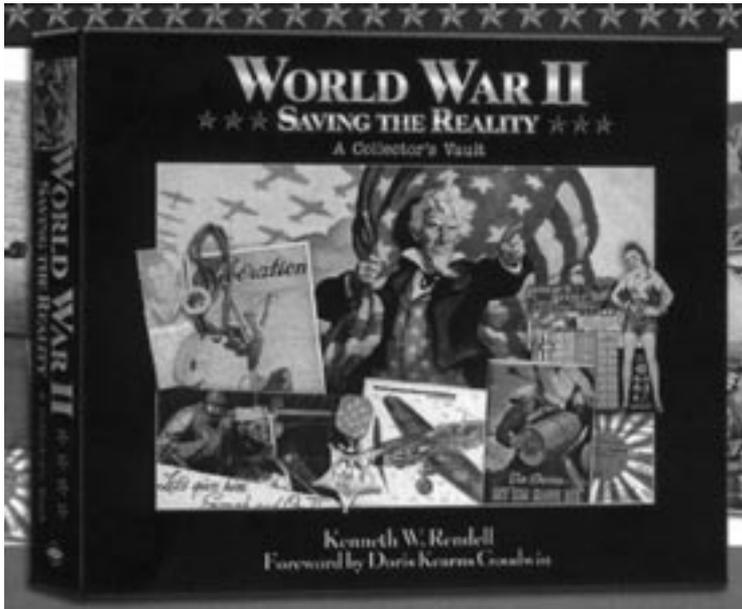
World War II

Wizardology... Dragonology... Pirates... Titanic... parents and grandparents among us are sure to be familiar with these and other thick oversize nonfiction books on faddish topics that have become mainstays for young adults in recent years. Heavily laden with facsimiles of all sizes attached in a variety of imaginative ways (envelope, foldout, pop-up, string, etc.), these spinoffs of the traditional kids' pop-up book make us all wish we were nine again so we too could indulge.

Well, we can, for dealer Kenneth Rendell's *World War II: Saving the Reality—A Collector's Vault* is precisely such a book—for adults. Issued in conjunction with the opening of the Museum of WW II in Natick, Massachusetts, this museum and this book highlight Rendell's unparalleled personal collection of World War Two artifacts, gathered over the course of several decades. As he notes in his preface, "The goal is to surround the visitor with all the elements a person in World War II in that particular area would have seen, read, touched, smelled, experienced.... Everything in the museum is original—there are no reproductions and everything, with rare exceptions, was produced during or before the war." For those of us who can't make it to Natick to visit this exciting new undertaking, *World War II: Saving the Reality* makes as good a substitute as can be imagined.

World War II: Saving the Reality divides World War Two into twenty brief chapters, each covering one manageable aspect of the war. Each chapter features a concise and informative text and numerous artfully arranged, beautifully photographed artifacts, some of which are contained in open-end sleeves or taped on with artificially-aged masking tape (clever touch, that!) to give a casual "scrapbook feel." Each chapter also includes a handy timeline listing major events in chronological order.

The autographs, though—*aah, the autographs!* Such autographs as World War II buffs *fantasize* about... *dream* about... *pray* may come their way before they die. This is par for the course at Rendell's museum, so be prepared to have your eyes pop and your breath sucked away at every turn. Not to give short shrift



to the mind-blowingly exceptional array of three-dimensional artifacts with which *World War II: Saving the Reality* is bulging, but let's face it: The letters, documents, signed images and other papers that pepper these pages are what really stir the blood of most of us. Some may actually find this overabundance of images both on the text pages and separate overly busy or distracting, but I find the effect visceral and stimulating.

The loose or attached facsimiles, by the way, are superbly done, as of course are the traditional text illustrations. Whenever possible they appear to be done at actual size, and on paper simulating the original—and all have the word “Reproduction” conscientiously printed on the verso. Facsimiles of patriotic postcards or posters appear on a slick heavy gauge stock, while facsimiles of correspondence appear on thick stock imitating the originals. Such attention to detail won't be lost on discriminating WW II collectors.

“The Rise of Nazism,” for instance, depicts a catchy color pencil sketch—“Hitler's sketch of the Nazi Party banner”—while attached to the same page is a larger rough pencil sketch, “Hitler's sketch of the eagle for the Party Square in Nuremberg, with

an authentication written and signed by his architect, Albert Speer.”

The chapter “Munich” displays a stunner: a typescript copy of the Munich Agreement with “Adolf Hitler’s bold changes in this, the only draft or copy... in his dynamic strokes crossing out paragraphs he had already planned to eliminate....”

“The Fall of France” shows off a great facsimile of the title page of a signed and inscribed copy of Charles de Gaulle’s *Vers L’Armee de Metier (Towards the Army of the Future)*. In this 1934 study the French leader not only predicted that Germany would attack France—he accurately spelled out how they would do it.

The meaty “U.S. Military” chapter made my heart skip a beat with Patton’s personal copy of Hitler’s *My Battle* (which “contains the general’s notes on seven pages,” though to my disappointment it doesn’t illustrate any of those notes) and an incredible Patton letter of 1907 to his father bemoaning the development of machine guns, the effect of which “so ruined the beauty of war.”

“Absolutely stunning” is how I’d describe a book shown in the “Prisoners of War” chapter. What I mistook for the handsome pictorial dust jacket of a book I’d never encountered—H.M. Lowe’s *Memoirs of Sagan*—is actually the hand-painted front cover of this soldier’s handwritten diary chronicling life as a POW in Stalag III. A powerful piece, of course one of a kind.

Personal favorite facsimiles would include a three-page ALS of 1944 from Eisenhower to wife Mamie featuring poignant commentary on the nature of war—wickedly paired up in the same sleeve with a fine war-date portrait of Ike with lengthy inscription to Kay Summersby, Ike’s wartime chauffeur and secretary and allegedly his mistress.

Not to overlook mention of the staggering quality and variety of non-autographs of which *World War II: Saving the Reality* is chock full—far too rich to address in this context—let’s visit just one example. “Resistance” is a crowd-pleasing chapter, with examples of counterfeiting and sabotage and spy tools. The English camera so small it fits into a matchbox, coins with attached blades that swivel out, a cigarette lighter and pipe capable of shooting bullets, a belt buckle that doubles as a compass, pencils that explode—real life James Bond stuff. And in the same chapter, eye-opening to this dealer is the “Black Propaganda” section, which Rendell describes as “information, printed or broadcast

by radio, that appears to come from one source—a government, usually—but actually originates from the enemy, with the intent to demoralize, confuse, or vilify.” He goes on:

The British took black propaganda to levels never seen before, or since. They faked everything: not just currency, ration stamps, and books; they faked German newspapers, wanted posters, and literature. They even faked notices sent to German families announcing the death of their loved ones in combat....

Among other jaw-droppers pictured are a forged Hitler obituary supposedly written by Goering (meant to discredit Goering once “discovered”) and a British-made German newspaper that even mentions the British forging newspapers!

But these admittedly random examples of select artifacts represent but a fraction of the relics Rendell so discriminatingly gathered. Choice as they are individually, they fail to convey the powerful overall impact of *World War II: Saving the Reality*. A book so heavily reliant on visual impact can only be properly appreciated through old-fashioned in-person reading and browsing.

Collectors interested in specific facets of Rendell’s collection will appreciate a nifty “For the Collector and Historian” sidebar that appears in the lower right corner of many pages. These handy snippets offer straightforward advice, observations, cautions and warnings to those interested in gathering the subject matter of that particular chapter. Of Nazi Germany artifacts he remarks:

Generally speaking this is a very treacherous area to collect because of the large number of fakes and forgeries. Any pieces claiming to have been associated with major personalities, particularly Hitler, need to be accompanied by very direct proof. It is not just modern forgers that are the problem—soldiers’ stories became embellished over the years as to where they found things. Hitler himself added to the problem by having extremely well executed lithographic signatures on many documents and letters.

“Why and How the Museum of World War II Was Created” closes out *World War II: Saving the Reality* nicely, an engaging personal essay in which Rendell recounts his half-century odys-

sey. It's easy to share in his "extraordinarily exciting" jaunts to England in the good old days, where "Paper propaganda was so inexpensive that... I would fill a shopping bag full at an English ephemera fair for £5—nothing cost more than \$1 and most pieces were bought for 25¢...." It's also easy to share his frustration at the near-complete disinterest of collectors and institutions years ago at the notion of collecting such relatively recent material.

Although it's not generally the domain of book reviewers to comment on a book's future (other than bestseller potential, that is) this dealer finds himself worried about the fate of Rendell's *World War II* years down the road—from a purely physical perspective. These oversize thick-paged volumes loaded with loose inserts don't age well. Frequent turning of the heavy pages inevitably make the book's binding what us bibliophiles call "shaken"; the heavy pockets affixed to many pages tend to bend or tear those pages; and some of the loose inserts invariably get lost or damaged. The slipcase does help to preserve the volume and prevent these damages—sometimes. Not too many years down the road I picture booksellers describing a copy as scarce because the binding isn't cracked and it isn't lacking any inserts.

You'll want to treat Rendell's *World War II: Saving the Reality* with care—not just to insure that it bears up well over the years. The wonderful immediacy his outstanding illustrations lend the subject matter make this one of those volumes you want to hang onto and return to again and again.

A Catalogue Worth Saving

Not to preempt my fellow columnist's next auction report, I nevertheless feel obligated to review a recent New York auction house catalogue that many a collector of literary autographs might wish to acquire for reference value. Fans of New York bookseller Burt Britton's *Self-Portrait: Book People Picture Themselves* (Random House, 1976) should rejoice, for Bloomsbury Auctions has issued *Portrait of the Artist: The Burt Britton Collection* to chronicle their September 24th auction.

Self-Portrait: Book People Picture Themselves is an odd-shaped volume which this dealer discovered decades ago and has occasionally found useful as a reference. It gathers about 600



self-portraits of famous authors, editors, illustrators and other bookish types (including a few actors and athletes, for instance) made for the compiler while an employee at the famed Strand Book Store. I'd often wondered what had become of Britton's collection, going so far as to try contacting him years ago (he didn't offer to sell me his collection)—so imagine my delight

when *Portrait of the Artist: The Burt Britton Collection* turned up in my mailbox recently, a classy auction catalogue from the New York branch of the London-based Bloomsbury Auctions.

Portrait of the Artist represents the most unusual auction catalogue this dealer (admittedly not an auction aficionado) has seen in recent years. Interestingly, of the 213 lots offered at fairly robust estimates, only about 35% (75 lots) sold. A lovely sketch of “a bag full of books” by British artist David Hockney, which graces the rear cover, proved the auction’s high point, fetching an impressive \$16,000 against an estimate of \$10,000-\$15,000. Other high-estimate self-portraits from heavily-collected modern artists such as Philip Guston, Robert Motherwell, Larry Rivers and others failed to sell. Presumably the reasoning was that well-heeled modern art collectors willing to buy artwork from these figures in the six-digits-on-up range would gladly pick up quickie ink sketches in the lowly five-digit range. I leave more detailed reporting of prices realized in this auction to my esteemed colleague Ed Bomsey.

What makes *Portrait of the Artist* an especially valuable companion guide to Britton’s book is that most of the illustrations depict the signed sketches larger than they appear in the 1976 book. Also, a number of signed sketches appear here that were obtained after the 1976 book—actor Robin Williams, to name just one, plus a scattering of others—so it brings the 30-plus year old book up to date.

More than representing a large cache of authentic handwriting exemplars—many of whose handwriting examples aren’t to be found in reference works—*Portrait of the Artist* and *Self-Portrait* intrigue us in demonstrating the imaginative and artistic ability of a broad spectrum of authors. Many of these authors are also well-known artists, photographers and the like, so artistic ability fails to surprise. (Though it still amazes that any human being can whip out some of these phenomenal images on short notice.)

Sure, there are more than a few authors here whose attempt at self-portraiture resembles a stick figure drawn by a kindergartner: Truman Capote, George Plimpton, John Cage, Maya Angelou, Dennis Hopper, Sidney Poitier and others. Far more often, though, readers are likely to find themselves exclaiming how this or that author was an exceptionally sharp caricaturists. From Anthony Burgess’s striking close-up of his manic face with bars

of music (he also composed) representing his furrowed brow glaring downward at his signature, to Ralph Ellison's thoughtful pencil sketch of himself in suit and tie, to Paul Bowles' eerie stylized rendition of himself against an otherworldly background, to Tom Wolfe's beautifully executed full-length sketch of himself in perennial white suite lounging cross-legged in an overstuffed chair, to Stephen Spender's surprisingly accomplished portrait with arresting eyes, to John Updike's incredibly on-target caricature with a cut-out of a typeset "Updike" for a mouth, to William Gaddis's way-cool minimalist outline of his suit-clad torso in profile (sans head) clutching a drink... The range and variety of these and many dozens more authors in *Portrait of the Artist* amazes and delights. What I'd really like to know is which authors refused Britton's request for a self-portrait.

Those wanting to pair up *Portrait of the Artist* with the 1976 *Self-Portrait* will of course have to hit the secondary market. At the moment, there are a handful of copies of the original publication for sale online at the usual insane free-for-all range of prices (between .75 cents and \$800 for similar softbound copies), with most falling in the under \$50 range.